

## Original Paper

# Korean Immigrant Women and Intimate Partner Violence: A Review of the Literature

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### Abstract

*This article reviews and synthesizes the existing empirical studies on intimate partner violence among Korean immigrant women. A comprehensive search of the literature was conducted for the period of 1997 to 2017. From 9 eligible studies that met the inclusion criteria, prevalence rates and risk factors of intimate partner violence and help seeking behavior among Korean immigrant women are discussed. Based on the findings of this review, suggestions for future research are presented.*

### Keywords

*intimate partner violence, Korean immigrants, prevalence, risk factor*

## 1. Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a serious public health problem that affects about 4.8 million women in the United States each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Although considerable research has examined the extent, nature, and consequences of IPV during the past few decades, studies on IPV among Asian immigrant women in the U.S. are relatively limited (Leung & Cheung, 2008; West, 1998). Particularly, the problem of IPV among Korean immigrant women has been largely ignored by researchers (Ahn, Mohan, & Burnett, 2003).

Korean immigrants are one of the most rapidly growing ethnic minority groups in the United States (E. Lee, 2007). The number of Korean immigrants has increased from 70,000 in 1970 to 1,706,822 in 2010 (Ahn, 2006; Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Hasan, 2012). Currently, Korean immigrants constitute the fifth largest group of Asian Americans, representing 10% of the total Asian American population in the U.S. (Hoeffel et al., 2012). According to recent studies (Pew Research Center, 2012; Terrazas & Batog, 2010), nearly 80% of adult Korean Americans were foreign-born population and about 28% of the Korean foreign-born population entered the U.S. after 2000. Another study (M. Kim et al., 2002) found

that many Korean immigrants preserved their native language and culture, resulting in isolation from the mainstream of American society, low assimilation, and high levels of ethnic identity.

Given the fact that Asian Americans include a variety of ethnic subgroups with their own languages, cultures, and immigration experiences (Reeves & Bennett, 2004; Cho, 2012), there is a pressing need to understand the unique experiences of abused Korean immigrant women. In addition, although a few studies have explored the problem of IPV among Korean immigrant women (Rhee, 1997; J. Kim & Sung, 2000; E. Lee, 2007), many questions still remain about the extent and nature of IPV, predictive factors, and help seeking behavior of this population. Therefore, this study reviews and synthesizes the existing empirical studies on IPV among Korean immigrant women. Based on the findings from the review, this study presents a direction for future research.

## 2. Methods

For this review, a comprehensive search of the literature was conducted for the period of 1997 to 2017 using the following databases: Criminal Justice Abstract, ProQuest, PubMed, and JSOR. The keywords were focused on the two areas of IPV (e.g., domestic violence, spousal violence, or wife abuse) and Korean immigrants (e.g., Korean Americans). A search using Google Scholar was also performed to identify articles that were not listed in the databases. Finally, the references of identified articles were hand searched to find studies that were not identified in the searched databases.

For inclusion in this review, studies must (a) be published in a peer-reviewed journal, (b) include surveys or interviews that were conducted with the Korean immigrant population (e.g., victims or perpetrators), and (c) put the main focus on intimate partner violence. This review excluded books, dissertations, review articles, and theoretical articles. Finally, 9 articles that met the inclusion criteria were included in the review.

## 3. Results

Table 1 presents key components of the 9 studies reviewed. Of the 9 articles, 7 were quantitative studies and 2 were qualitative studies. The sample sizes in the quantitative studies varied between 123 and 592. Of the 5 studies that were conducted to estimate the prevalence of IPV among Korean immigrants, 3 used the *Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS) and 2 used the *Revised Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS2). Of the 2 qualitative articles, one used semi-structured interviews and the other used the case study. The qualitative studies used smaller samples. One study conducted in-depth interviews with 5 participants and the other consisted of interviews with one family.

**Table 1. Key Components of Studies Included in the Review**

Author (s)	Purpose of the Study	Sample and Design	Findings
Ahn, Mohan, & Brunett (2003)	To examine the prevalence of IPV and the link between the attitudes toward IPV and the incidence of IPV among Korean American adults.	223 Korean immigrants in Baton Rouge, LA (105 males & 118 females). Mail survey.	30.2% reported minor physical violence and 15.1% reported severe physical violence. A significant correlation between the attitudes toward partner abuse and the incident of partner abuse was found.
C. Kim (2017)	To investigate the impact of childhood victimization and patriarchal ideology on IPV among Korean immigrant women.	127 Korean immigrant women (64 victims & 63 non victims). Online survey and Case control design.	Childhood victimization and patriarchal gender ideology strongly predicted IPV.
I. Kim & Zane (2004)	To examine the relationship among emotional regulation and attachment styles and level of physical abuse in Korean American and European American male batterers.	52 Korean American court-referred adult men attending batterer's treatment programs in California. Survey.	Compared to European American batterers, Korean immigrant male batterers controlled their anger less and displayed a more avoidant attachment style.
J. Kim & Sung (2000)	To explore the incidence of IPV in Korean American families and analyze the factors that might contribute to IPV.	256 Korean American men from randomly selected Korean households couples in Chicago and New York. Telephone survey.	18% reported committing at least one act of physical assault against their wives within the past year and 6.3% reported committing severe violence against their wives. Immigration related stress and male dominance increased the risk of IPV.
E. Lee (2007)	To examine the prevalence and risk factors of IPV among Korean immigrant women.	136 Korean immigrant women. Survey.	29.4% reported physical assault by male partner and 72.8% reported psychological aggression. A strong link between male partner's alcohol use and IPV was found.
S. Lee (2003)	To present how IPV can be evaluated and treated better from the perspectives of	1 Korean American family. Case study method.	Korean husband who experienced psychological stress from losing his previous occupational status tended to

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	multicultural hermeneutics.		be more physically violent when his sense of <i>chae-myun</i> (saving face) was damaged.
Y. Lee & Bell-Scott (2009)	To examine Korean immigrant women's experiences of IPV and post-divorce adjustment.	5 Korean immigrant women. Semi-structured in-depth interviews.	Korean women experienced several stages from abused wives to self-reliance divorce women.
Leung & Cheung (2008)	To report the prevalence of IPV and examine help seeking preferences in six Asian American ethnic groups.	123 Korean of the 1577 Asian respondents in Texas. Survey.	The prevalence of partner abuse for Korean Americans was 19.5 percent. Medical doctors and friends were the most commonly used sources of help for Korean Americans.
Liles et al. (2012)	To examine the prevalence and correlates of IPV among Korean immigrant women.	592 Korean immigrant women in California. Telephone survey.	Psychological aggression was the most prevalent form of abuse. Immigration stress was a significant predictor for psychological aggression.

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### 3.1 Prevalence of IPV

While there are no nationwide studies on the prevalence of IPV among Korean immigrants in the U.S., a few small-scale studies have been conducted to estimate the prevalence of IPV among Korean immigrant families (Ahn et al., 2003; J. Kim & Sung, 2000; Lee, 2007; Leung & Cheung, 2008; Liles et al., 2012). For example, based on telephone interviews with 256 males from randomly selected Korean households in Chicago and New York, J. Kim and Sung (2000) found that 18% of the women experienced one or more physical assaults and 6.3% experienced severe violence by their husbands within the past year. However, these rates of violent incidence should be considered as minimum estimates because the findings came from male samples only and perpetrators might tend to underreport their violence. In another study of 223 Korean immigrants in Baton Rouge, Ahn et al. (2003) concluded that IPV among Korean immigrants was highly prevalent. Specifically, 30.2% of the respondents reported committing physical violence during the past year. The rate for severe physical violence such as biting, kicking, hitting with a fist, and threatening with a knife or gun was 15.1%. Leung and Cheung (2008) tried to provide data on the prevalence of IPV in 6 Asian American ethnic groups: Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese. In a representative survey of Asian Americans living in Houston, 19.5% of Korean respondents reported physical abuse. Koreans and Indians (19.5%) were less likely than Vietnamese (22.4%) and Filipinos (21.8%) to experience IPV. They were more likely to encounter IPV than Japanese (9.7%) or Chinese (9.7%).

While these studies focused on physical abuse using the *Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS), other two studies that adopted the *Revised Conflict Tactic Scale* (CTS2) explored other forms of abuse as well as physical assault. In a survey of a convenience sample of 136 Korean immigrant women in Austin or Dallas, E. Lee (2007) found that about 30% of the respondents reported experiencing physical assault by their male partners in the last year. 72.8% of Korean women experienced psychological aggression. A study involving a telephone survey of 592 Korean immigrant women in California (Liles et al., 2012) found that 27.4% of the women reported psychological aggression and 17.3% reported sexual coercion. Overall, findings indicated that Korean immigrant women have been physically assaulted by their partners in significant percentages, ranging from 18% to 30%. The results from two studies that used the CTS2 showed high prevalence rate of psychological abuse (about 30%-70%) among Korean immigrant women.

### 3.2 Risk Factors

Several studies have identified risk factors associated with IPV among Korean immigrants: immigration-related stress, patriarchal values and male dominance, alcohol use, anger control and attachment style, and childhood victimization.

J. Kim and Sung (2000) suggested immigration-related stress as one of the risk factors for IPV among Korean immigrant couples. They found that 70% of the Korean immigrant couples in their sample experienced occupational and economic stress derived from diverse challenges including language barriers, downward mobility, inability to adjust to the new environment, and discrimination. Husbands with higher levels of stress were more likely than their counterparts to physically assault their wives (38% of high-stress couples vs. 2% of low-stress couples). In another study (Liles et al., 2012), immigration stress was a significant predictor of psychological abuse for Korean immigrant women. Through a case study of one Korean American family, S. Lee (2003) presented how psychological stress influenced the incidence of IPV. In this study, the Korean husband, as an immigrant, experienced severe psychological stress from losing his previous occupational status because his self-esteem and social status were mainly associated with his occupation. He tended to take his frustration out on his wife and be more physically violent when his sense of *chae-myun* (saving face) was damaged.

In addition to immigration-related stress, patriarchal values and male dominance have been suggested as influencing IPV among Korean immigrants. The Korean traditional family value is deeply rooted in Confucianism that emphasizes hierarchical family structure, patriarchy, and family ties (Song & Moon, 1998). While men are traditionally highly valued and expected to control the family, women are expected to obey their husbands. Three studies showed associations between patriarchal values and IPV. For example, J. Kim and Sung (2000) found that the prevalence of IPV was much higher in male-dominated relationships (33%) than egalitarian relationships (12%). Particularly, the rate of severe violence (e.g., wife beating) by the husbands in male-dominated relationships was four times higher than that in egalitarian relationships. Another study (C. Kim, 2017) indicated that women with higher levels of patriarchal values were more likely to be victims of IPV. Ahn et al. (2003) also pointed

out that permissive attitude toward partner abuse were significantly correlated with the incidence of IPV.

The characteristics of perpetrators involved in IPV have been studied: alcohol use and anger control and attachment style. Alcohol abuse has been related with the perpetration of IPV in other studies (e.g., Leonard & Blane, 1992; O'Farrell & Murphy, 1995). Consistent with previous studies, E. Lee (2007) found that male partner's alcohol use was associated with the perpetration of IPV, including physical assault, psychological aggression, and injury. I. Kim and Zane (2004) examined the relationship among emotional control and attachment patterns and level of physical abuse in Korean American and European American male batterers. Compared to European American batterers, Korean immigrant male batterers controlled their anger less and displayed a more avoidant attachment style. Poor anger control and an avoidant attachment style influenced the perpetration of IPV among Korean immigrants in this study.

Finally, violence experienced in childhood has been suggested as one of the risk factors for IPV among Korean immigrants. While one study (Weaver & Clum, 1996) suggested that 71% of the abused women reported childhood physical abuse and 53% reported childhood sexual abuse, reviews of the literature on the effect of child abuse on IPV victimization have suggested inconsistent results across studies (Riggs, Caulfield, & Street, 2000). Two studies (C. Kim, 2017; E. Lee, 2007) found that childhood physical violence was a strong predictor for IPV victimization among Korean immigrant women.

### *3.3 Help Seeking Behavior*

Compared to studies on the prevalence and risk factors of IPV, there have been only a limited number of studies of help seeking behavior among Korean immigrant women. Leung and Cheung (2008) examined help seeking preferences in 6 Asian American ethnic groups. Findings indicated that Korean immigrants sought help from medical doctors (47.2%), friends (31.7%), religious leaders (24.4%), and mental health professionals (10.6%) when they had to deal with family issues. These findings were consistent with previous studies that Asians often did not disclose their family problems to strangers (Ho, 1990; Rimonte, 1989), but they might tell medical doctors about their physical symptoms when the problems influenced their physical well-being. However, in this study, the survey questions on help-seeking behavior asked were not specifically about IPV, but a family difficulty.

Based on in-depth interviews with 5 Korean immigrant women, Y. Lee and Bell-Scott (2009) examined Korean immigrant women's experiences of IPV and post-divorce adjustment. Women in this study described that they concealed their abuse until they reached a turning point, primarily relying on emotion and avoidance-focused coping strategies. The turning point that was often associated with an escalation of violence led women to adopt problem-focused strategies. Women sought help from pastors, family, friends, and counselors and began to prepare for leaving abusive relationships.

#### 4. Discussion

The literature on Korean immigrant IPV has suggested that IPV among Korean immigrant women is highly prevalent, ranging from 18% to 30%. Immigration and acculturative stress, patriarchal values, alcohol use, poor anger control and avoidance attachment style, and childhood victimization have been identified as contributing factors to IPV among Korean immigrant women. In the process of help seeking, Korean immigrant women concealed their abuse until they reached a turning point. The turning point such as an escalation of violence led women to seek help from outside.

Based on the available studies, there is a need for conducting rigorous studies that examine IPV in the lives of Korean immigrant women. While the national studies have rarely considered Asian ethnic subgroups including Korean, the prevalence research on IPV among Korean immigrants have been based on small community studies. Information of those studies has been collected in a single metropolitan area or based on convenience sample. Findings from the studies could not be generalized to the national level. To increase generalizability, future researchers should investigate the prevalence of IPV among Korean immigrants in multiple areas using representative samples.

There is also a need for both qualitative and quantitative researchers to provide a more detailed and in-depth understanding about help seeking behavior among Korean immigrant IPV victims. Particularly, given the absence of published articles regarding seeking help from the police among Korean immigrant women (Shim & Hwang, 2005), in-depth or sufficient descriptions of the dynamics of arrests for IPV cases are required. In this sense, longitudinal and qualitative studies to explore the factors associated with help seeking behavior are needed.

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